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TAGS: PGOV KDEM ASEC PREL PHUM ZI
SUBJECT: TEA WITH MUGABE: CODEL PAYNE'S MARATHON MEETING AT
STATE HOUSE

REF: A. HARARE 444
1B. 08 HARARE 140

Classified By: Ambassador James D. McGee for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) On May 30 President Robert Mugabe received Congressmen Donald Payne (D-NJ), Ambassador McGee, and staffers at his State House office for a nearly three-hour-long meeting. Throughout the marathon meeting Mugabe was alert, articulate, in apparent good health, and defiant. Congressman Payne gently and masterfully praised Mugabe for his liberation credentials before confronting him about human rights abuses. Mugabe neither confirmed nor denied the abuses. His version of Zimbabwe's history, which he explained in an hour-long monologue, painted him as the victim of international abuse and broken promises -- largely led by Britain and George W. Bush. Despite his defiance, Mugabe articulated his deep desire for acceptance into the international community again, although he did not offer to make any concessions or policy revisions that would lead to Zimbabwe's full reintegration in the community of nations. The meeting covered a wide range of topics including a discussion of last year's elections, and finally a friendly chat over tea about pirates in Somalia, South African politics, and the global economic crisis. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) On the occasion of the visit of Congressman Donald Payne (D-NJ), Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health, the Ambassador and a group of staffers met with President Mugabe at State House on May 30. The two-hour and forty minute long meeting was cordial, despite Payne's direct confrontation of Mugabe on human rights abuses. This was the first private meeting we have had with President Mugabe since the Ambassador last called on him in February 2008 (ref B). It was also by far the longest of the four meetings Ambassador McGee has had with the president during his assignment. President Mugabe was accompanied by Minister

of Agriculture Joseph Made, Americas Division Chief from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ambassador Sengwe, and the MFA United States desk officer Energy Chawonetka. Congressman Payne and the Ambassador were accompanied by poloff and professional congressional staffers Dr. Pearl-Alice Marsh, Noelle LuSane, and Ted Dagne.

Stuck in the Past: Mugabe's Revisionist History Lesson

¶13. (C) Mugabe opened the meeting by thanking Payne for his visit, commenting that Zimbabwe hadn't had many visitors lately. He then launched into a one-hour lecture explaining Zimbabwe's history, from the arrival of British colonials a century ago, through the liberation war, the Lancaster House agreement, and up until the present. Although his voice trailed at times, he spoke clearly and logically and only turned to Minister Made and Ambassador Sengwe occasionally to be reminded of specific names and dates. Predictably, Mugabe Qbe reminded of specific names and dates. Predictably, Mugabe described land as the "number one grievance" of the people at the Lancaster House negotiations that led to Zimbabwe's independence in 1980. He spoke highly of the willingness of the Carter administration to help fund land reform. His tone changed to dismay and embitterment as he described the policy reversal during the Reagan and subsequent Bush (Bush 1) administrations that stopped the funding for land reform.

¶14. (C) Mugabe spoke fondly of George H.W. Bush, noting that

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they became friends when Bush was Reagan's vice president and that he later visited Washington at President Bush's invitation. Mugabe was dismayed, however, that Bush agreed only to restore health assistance and not the land reform assistance he believes was promised at Lancaster House. Mugabe further bitterly recalled the dismissive letter from then-Development Minister Clare Short that denied British responsibility for continued funding of land reform.

¶15. (C) Speaking more forcefully and loudly, Mugabe went on to describe former British Prime Minister Tony Blair's response to Zimbabwe's fast track land reform. Mugabe explained that because Blair "couldn't honestly say Zimbabwe was wrong" Blair had to "look for the usual thing (to fault Zimbabwe) -- democracy, human rights, rule of law." Frustrated, Mugabe explained that the Government of Zimbabwe (GOZ) tried to seek intervention from the EU president at the time, Jacques Chirac, who refused to hear the issue. "So," Mugabe sighed, "we were to be condemned by Britain for following tenets of democracy that they never obeyed. And then the sanctions started."

¶16. (C) Reaching this point in history, Mugabe became increasingly adamant and agitated, as he asked, "in the context of all the countries in the world -- are we really the worst?" Mugabe then, predictably, said that the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act (ZDERA) and sanctions had caused the suffering of the Zimbabwean people and should be lifted. He went on to deny turning away from democracy, recalling that he was in prison for 11 years because he fought for democracy.

Dismissive Tone Towards MDC

¶17. (C) Having completed his hour-long history lecture, Mugabe turned to recent events. He spoke more slowly and carefully and in a way that subtly dismissed the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). For instance, he described the 2008 elections as "controversial" because the MDC and ZANU-PF had nearly tied. He carefully explained the parliamentary results by saying that ZANU-PF had a narrow majority in

parliament. (NOTE: This is true only because he included the Senate in his math, which includes numerous seats that he personally appoints. END NOTE.) When the MDC refused to participate in the June 2008 run-off, Mugabe said some refused to accept the results "for political reasons." Despite winning the run-off, Mugabe explained that even if he had wanted to form a government, with only a small majority in parliament he needed to rely on others. Consequently, they relied on recommendations from SADC. Mugabe appeared increasingly uncomfortable in his seat as he explained the structure of the inclusive government and said it was working well "so far."

¶ 18. (C) He acknowledged that there were a few "sticking issues" in the agreement -- which he described as an "intermarriage" -- including governorships, permanent Q "intermarriage" -- including governorships, permanent secretaries and ambassadorial appointments. (NOTE: He did not mention the continued controversial appointments of Reserve Bank Governor Gideon Gono or Attorney General Johannes Tomana as outstanding issues. END NOTE.) On the issue of governors, he said that their appointments were the "prerogative of the president" but he agreed to make changes in the "spirit" of the agreement. Although Tsvangirai wants to make the appointments "now," Mugabe said that would not be fair and noted that the governors would be given two to three months' notice before being asked to vacate their seats. (NOTE: Separately we learned the governors will likely be sworn-in in August. END NOTE.)

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¶ 19. (C) Regarding permanent secretaries, Mugabe said that the six principals (himself, the two vice presidents, the prime minister, and the two deputy prime ministers) had re-evaluated the permanent secretaries in each of the ministries. He appeared to dismiss the exercise, which he described as a "review" of the Public Service Commission (PSC) appointments. (NOTE: The PSC is a semi-independent body heavily biased towards ZANU-PF. All of the permanent secretaries, who oversee internal ministerial operations, have maintained their positions after the review by the six principals. END NOTE.)

¶ 110. (C) Regarding ambassadorships, Mugabe confirmed that new ambassadors would be a mix of appointments from MDC-T, MDC-M and ZANU-PF as ambassadors' terms end or they retire from diplomatic service. He also noted that Zimbabwe will re-open its embassy in Dakar, Senegal.

Mugabe on the Economy

¶ 111. (C) Turning to the economy, Mugabe opined that while the sanctions are allegedly targeted, perhaps they are designed to affect the economy as well. He noted that the agricultural sector was the mainstay of the economy, and that manufacturing had suffered recently because of its reliance on agricultural outputs. Mugabe remarked that Zimbabwe has rich mining resources yet to be tapped, mentioning gold and platinum specifically. Regarding diamonds, Mugabe said they have not yet established exactly where the deposits are. Finally, while there are uranium deposits in the north, Zimbabwe doesn't intend to "go nuclear" like some countries have done, he commented with a giggle.

Mugabe on Zimbabwe's Golden Age of Education

¶ 112. (C) Mugabe then turned back to his history lesson as he explained the educational reforms undertaken in the early 1980s. He went on to describe in detail a plan with Cuba to train math and science teachers that arose from Zimbabwe's hosting of the non-aligned countries in 1986. Because

sanctions on Cuba proved to be too much of a burden, the math and science university was established in Bindura, Zimbabwe rather than Cuba.

Lift the Sanctions

¶13. (C) After talking non-stop for over an hour -- and without so much as a sip of water or a clearing of the throat -- Mugabe turned to Congressman Payne and the Ambassador in a much more engaged fashion. He said he was happy Payne had come, and summarized the priorities for Zimbabwe: food, education, infrastructure such as roads, and -- above all -- land. He noted that the manufacturing sector is struggling and that Zimbabwe wants to recover. The way to recover, he said, is by lifting sanctions. Mugabe continued by declaring that "we want to engage with the world," as he cited the international organizations that Zimbabwe ascribes to, Qinternational organizations that Zimbabwe ascribes to, including the United Nations and World Bank. He continued, "we want to play our role as a free Zimbabwe in a free world. Why should we be punished for sins we've not committed? Perhaps you've brought us the flag of freedom to lift sanctions." He spoke with cautious optimism as he noted that the "problem" with American sanctions is that you have congress and the administration, and you don't know where to

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start.

Payne Praises and Confronts Mugabe

¶14. (C) After listening attentively, Congressman Payne finally addressed Mugabe and began by praising him for his liberation credentials. Payne noted that he had been Mugabe's "fan" as a young person and throughout the liberation movement in Zimbabwe. He recalled that Mugabe had received significant support from Americans for standing up to the Rhodesians and fighting for voting rights and education for Zimbabwe's blacks. Payne skillfully noted that he had followed Mugabe's "distinguished" career since its inception but noted that he is now concerned about the things he reads.

¶15. (C) Payne continued carefull, saying that all countries have problems, including the United States, but that we have a system to clean it up and prosecute wrongdoers. He noted that we want to see the people of Zimbabwe have a better life and his tremendous admiration for the Zimbabwean people. However, the administration will make determinations on sanctions, but usually it will not make a change until there is evidence that changes have been made to correct what was wrong.

¶16. (C) Payne cited the Obama administration's recent changes to the policy towards Cuba to allow for remittances and visits as an example that there is a willingness of the new administration to change old policies. However, Payne noted, we can't make changes to the Zimbabwe policy as long as we continue to see people getting arrested for "no reason." He noted the "dichotomy" between the compassionate statesman who fought for freedom that he respects and the current government that now allows police to beat black women who dare protest.

¶17. (C) As Payne confronted him, Mugabe sank into the couch and appeared expressionless and somewhat stunned. At the mention of police beating women, he responded with a puzzled look, "Which women? Where did they get them from?" The Ambassador and Payne cited Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) protests as an example of women who have been beaten, and Mugabe went on the defensive, saying that they were manipulating and creating problems to seek more donor funds

from their sponsors.

¶18. (C) Payne continued by commenting that citizens have a right to agitate and governments have a duty to protect them.

He noted that Mugabe started as a civil agitator and spent 11 years in prison for it. "I was a civil agitator, too. I wouldn't be in congress if I hadn't been a civil agitator."

¶19. (C) Continuing with his cautious, but firm approach, Payne noted that the new administrations in Zimbabwe and the U.S. are an opportunity for change. He explained the "smart power" doctrine to establish more peace, more justice, and more smart power. He invited Zimbabwe to be part of these new attitudes, but said that there have to be some changes in Zimbabwe.

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¶20. (C) The Ambassador continued by noting that the USG approach to Zimbabwe had changed in subtle but significant ways in recent months and reaffirmed our desire to see the inclusive government work. He described the visit as an opportunity for dialogue "if we can talk about issues." He raised the issue of the American-owned property in the Save Valley Conservancy that is currently under threat (ref A) and the issues of credit to farmers as issues up for discussion,

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but reiterated that the USG wants to see conditions change. Payne again reiterated that we share the goal of having positive relations with Zimbabwe and noted that he and others in congress want to see the U.S. end isolationist policies.

¶21. (C) Mugabe responded well to Payne's gentle confrontation and noted that "we've never taken a decision to have a hostile relationship with anyone -- especially you. You were there when we started." Payne noted that it is a new day and there is hope for more dialogue.

Tea Time

¶22. (C) At the end of the fairly confrontational discussion, Mugabe commented, "well, I think we deserve some tea," at which point a white-gloved butler emerged and began the very formal process of serving tea. After the butler poured water over the guest's hands into a bowl and offered each guest a clean towel to dry their hands, the butler served tea, parmesan bread sticks, dinner rolls, sausage, and a beef/onion dish. Mugabe took his tea with milk and a few bread sticks but did not eat anything else.

¶23. (C) Over tea, the conversation mellowed significantly and Mugabe engaged Payne about his recent trip to Somalia and asked about the Somali pirates, South Africa, and the global economy.

Mugabe on South Africa

¶24. (C) Responding to the Ambassador's questions about the new administration in South Africa, Mugabe noted that it is "still the ANC" but sighed that he didn't think they treated Thabo well, particularly as he was in the midst of helping Zimbabwe. Mugabe continued to note that "to us (Mbeki) is a great man." He told the delegation that he will be giving Mbeki an award, something that "even Tsvangirai" agreed to. Mugabe described Mbeki as "judgmental and calculating" and cautious with policies. In contrast, Mugabe considers Zuma a "man of the people" who likes to make promises without necessarily knowing how to fulfill them. He noted that the South African people want to see their social needs attended to. While Zuma has made promises, it remains to be seen if they will come true. Mugabe opined that in order to fulfill his campaign promises, Zuma will have to take from the haves -- the whites -- and give to the have-nots. The question,

Mugabe believed, is if they (the whites) are willing to share their businesses with blacks. He said it was "easier" in Zimbabwe where there were "not that many whites," but "South Africa has four million whites... plus the Indians." He trailed off, remarking that South Africa "truly is a rainbow nation."

¶25. (C) As the tea cups emptied, the Ambassador informed Mugabe that the Congressman was on his way to meet businessmen and we needed to be on our way. Mugabe seemed to be enjoying himself as he engaged on Somalia and South Africa in a non-confrontational and exceedingly normal diplomatic conversation. He appeared almost sad to see us go. If the Qconversation. He appeared almost sad to see us go. If the Ambassador had not ended the meeting, we could have well been there another thirty minutes.

Mugabe: Possibly the Healthiest
85-year-old in Zimbabwe

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¶26. (C) Throughout the lengthy meeting, Mugab was alert and engaged. We noted, however, that he could not sit still. Although he was seated on a soft, comfortable leather sofa, he adjusted his weight to the left and right, and then later sat on the forward edge of the sofa and then slouched to the back, almost constantly. At times he appeared to be leaning heavily on the right arm rest, as if to alleviate pressure from sitting. He also constantly pulled up his socks. Despite previous rumors of possible throat cancer, we noted that his voice was fairly strong although he did speak softly at times during the first hour. Aside from frequent shifting, he rarely cleared his throat and appeared to be a vigorous 85-year-old in superb health.

COMMENT

¶27. (C) This extraordinarily long meeting was surreal, and Congressman Payne is to be commended for his suave confrontation of Mugabe. As an older African American who rooted for the liberation struggle, Payne connected with Mugabe in a way few probably can. While Mugabe did not acknowledge or apologize for the human rights abuses, he didn't deny the possibility that police had used excessive force.

¶28. (C) Mugabe is clearly stuck in the past, as evidenced by his longwinded rehashing of Zimbabwe's history. Furthermore, based on Mugabe's interpretation of sanctions and his international isolation, he clearly believes he has done the right thing along the way and has been betrayed by the West and their broken promises. His continued refusal to acknowledge the human rights abuses and stifled political environment represent a serious disconnect between his view of the world and the realities the Zimbabwean people struggle with every day. Nonetheless, Mugabe appears desperate to re-engage with the world and to be treated as an elder statesman. He appeared genuinely appreciative and relaxed when the Ambassador asked for his opinions on South Africa. Overall, this meeting was a success. In a subsequent dinner with other western ambassadors serving in Harare, the ambassadors indicated that perhaps they, too, would seek meetings with Mugabe and attempt to slowly re-engage with the recalcitrant leader. END COMMENT.

MCGEE